



Planning Your Visit

If you have less than one hour: Go to the Visitor Contact Station, view the short interpretive film shown in the Theater, and, as time allows, tour the Exhibit Building.

If you have more than one hour: Extend your tour by lingering longer with the exhibits, explore the Ethnobotany Garden, and venture to the scenic overlooks. A ½-mile loop trail begins at the far overlook, passing through the boreal forest and returning via the historic Valdez Trail.



The ½-mile Boreal Forest-Valdez Loop Trail follows even terrain, though wheelchair-users may need assistance. The trail passes along the river bluff, then cuts through the forest, connecting to a section of the Valdez Trail, the first all-American route into interior Alaska.



The Boreal Forest

The boreal forest is the northernmost and largest forest ecosystem in the world. Extreme cold and a short growing season are the main environmental factors that shape this forest. In this region, the boreal forest is composed of stands of white and black spruce, aspen, balsam poplar, birch, alder, and willow. A young forest often has more deciduous trees and shrubs. As the forest matures, spruce trees begin to dominate. Over time, the accumulation of spruce needles on the forest floor creates a thick buildup of organic matter, which decomposes slowly. This thick organic layer, in concert with canopy shade, keeps ground temperatures cool, increasing the depth of the permafrost.

Red squirrel

The red squirrel—the sentinel of the boreal woods—sends scolding alarms throughout the forest, tipping off other animals to intruders.

Diamond willow

Labrador tea

Swainson's thrush

Spruce bark beetle

Red squirrel midden

Spruce cone scales form middens as red squirrels discard them and eat the extracted seeds. Squirrels cache winter food deep within the middens.

Pine marten

Spruce broom rust

Kinnikinnick hosts the spruce broom rust fungus. Spores released from the fungus living on kinnikinnick enter the spruce tree, causing branch clustering, which provides habitat for squirrels and birds.

Snowshoe hare

Highbush cranberry

Kinnikinnick

Aspen

Dark-eyed Junco

Spruce grouse

Yellow-rumped warbler

White spruce

Spruce tree branches shed snow easily; branches bend rather than break. Needles can capture sunlight from any angle and conserve water, important where ice and snow lock water away much of the year.

Boreal chickadee

Permafrost

Permafrost limits the depths of root systems, so boreal tree roots tend to be shallow, obtaining water from surface soil.

Fireweed

Feather moss